

Timorese Family Reunions

POLITICS BEFORE PEOPLE

by Pat Walsh

This article surveys attempts made since 1975 to reunite Timorese families split up between Australia and East Timor.

Of the 625 agreed on for reunion in Australia, only 295 — less than half, have come.

The article looks at the political reasons for this and suggests that, after nearly five years of delays and heartbreak, it is time for the Australian Government (which is awarded 4/10 for its performance to date) to assert itself and for the International Red Cross and UN to look to their acknowledged responsibilities in the matter.

Separations

Australia became the first country of asylum for the first time in its history in 1975 when 2581 Timorese were evacuated to Darwin from East Timor between August and November of that year. The majority of these people left East Timor in August and September when the civil war between UDT and Fretilin was at its height, and were ferried to Darwin by boat and plane. The hi-jack by 37 Timorese of an RAAF Caribou from Baucau on Timor's north-east coast indicates the atmosphere of panic which prevailed at the time. Many were elderly people, women (some of whom were pregnant) and children (some without their parents). Of this whole group many were Chinese-Timorese and some were indigenous Timorese who had worked as servants in Timor. Some (mostly Portuguese nationals) went on to Portugal. But most chose to stay. 1850 were distributed between Darwin and migrant hostels around Australia and given temporary resident visas until December 31, 1975 by which time it was hoped the situation in Timor would be clearer and long-term decisions about the future could be made. Some were under the impression they would soon return to Timor for reunion with their families once the civil war was over. Such hopes were quickly dashed by the Indonesian invasion and sealing-off of their country in December 1975.

They had no choice but to stay. They were granted permanent residence in Australia from May 1976 and are now concentrated in Darwin, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth.

Reports of the war coupled with the loneliness and insecurity of exile heightened the refugees' fears for their families and the matter of family reunions was quickly broached.

First attempts at reunion

The first attempt at family reunification was made in late 1975/early 1976. According to the Timorese welfare officer in Melbourne, Mr Joao Goncalves, some Timorese in Australia were issued at this time with authority forms from the Australian Immigration Department which would permit family members in West Timor and East Timor to come to Australia without being subject to the normal migration requirements. These forms, which were valid until June 1976, were ignored by the Indonesian authorities. Hearing of the failures at the Timor end, Timorese in Australia attempted to have the June 30 deadline extended. They were not able to achieve this.

By this time, however, the issue of Timorese family reunion was the subject of frequent comment in the Federal Parliament. In October 1976, during discussions in Jakarta, Mr

Fraser and President Suharto agreed that officials of both countries should meet to resolve the problem. At least 11 meetings were to occur before an 'in principle' agreement on reunions was announced five months later in March 1977. This agreement stated that arrangements were proceeding for a visit to Dili by Australian officials "to take place as early as circumstances permit". Timorese in Australia were invited to nominate relatives for reunion and were informed that the acceptable categories for reunion were: "spouses, minor dependent children and parents of Australian citizens; and relatives who have employment skills and experience recognised and in demand in Australia".

They were given three weeks to lodge their nominations "so that the operation can proceed as quickly as possible". By the closing date on 22 April 1977, 2668 relatives had been nominated for admission to Australia. At the same time, the Timorese asked the Australian Government to take two precautions against possible abuse of information on relatives supplied to the Indonesian authorities in Timor. They requested that an international welfare agency such as the International Red Cross (ICRC) be invited to supervise the reunion program, and secondly that a member of the Timorese community in Australia be permitted to accompany the Australian Immigration team to Timor to act as an interpreter. Both proposals were rejected

by the Australian Government on the grounds that they would jeopardise the Australian-Indonesian agreement on reunions.

Disappointments

The note of optimism about a speedy resolution of the problem struck by the Government at this time proved to be a hollow one indeed. Despite the urgency of the matter and frequent reports that the Team's visit to Timor was 'imminent', nothing of significance was to happen for a further 14 months. No team went to Dili, and no families were reunited. Even the extension of de facto recognition by the Australian Government of Indonesia's takeover of Timor announced on January 20, 1978 failed to achieve Indonesian co-operation, despite the fact that it was advanced by Mr Peacock as one reason for recognition.

A further blow to the hopes of the waiting Timorese was the eventual disclosure that less than a quarter of the relatives nominated in April 1977 would be accepted for admission to Australia. A figure of 625 was apparently arrived at by both Governments in July 1978 "after protracted negotiations." Press reports, however, were making reference to an agreed list of 'about 600' names some time before this date. Though at least 625 out of 2668 are eligible to come, frequent media mention has now fixed this number of 600 in the public mind as the literal figure both distorting public expectations in regard to this group and eliminating from consideration the claims of the remaining 2000 nominees.

Presumably Indonesian reluctance to allow all the 2668 to leave Timor was a factor in the reduction for it has been reported on a number of occasions that they do not wish to be embarrassed by the exodus of large numbers of people from Timor. Indeed in its own press statements until the end of 1978 the Indonesian Government continually referred to the family reunion program as a *repatriation* exercise and avoided reference to reunions outside Timor in Australia. The Timorese themselves, both in Australia and Timor, did not see it that way. Only a handful of Timorese have actually returned to East Timor and, with one or two exceptions, these were religious sisters. Timorese in Timor have act-

ively discouraged relatives from returning. One parent wrote in late 1977:

"Tell my son that for nothing on this earth should he return to Timor. As soon as I possibly can, I shall leave here; but I would rather die without seeing him again than to know that he had returned to this hell".

It should be noted, however, that the Australian Government did give some indication on June 2, 1977 after receipt of the 2668 nominations that not all would satisfy the admission criteria. It was also clear that the Australian Government in deference to Indonesian sensitivities though in complete disregard of the reality inside Timor, was treating the reunion of families as a 'migration exercise' not as the intake of refugees from a war situation.

First reunions

Following a visit to Jakarta early in July 1978 by the then Immigration Minister, Mr Michael MacKellar, a high level meeting between Indonesian and Australian officials was decided on for July 25-26,

1978 - 14 months after the nominations had been called for in a hurry the previous April. After that meeting the Australian Government announced "that the procedures accepted by both sides will enable the processing and movement of the people involved by Christmas" and that "Indonesian and Australian officials will visit Indonesia (Dili) ... at about the end of October" for selection interviews. Well-founded Timorese scepticism about which Christmas was meant appeared to be confirmed when October passed without the team's departure followed by another Christmas spent in lonely separation from loved ones. A visit to Australia in December 1978 by the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Dr Mochtar, indicated, however, that at last some action could soon be expected. Following their discussions, Mr Peacock announced on December 15 that "agreement had been reached for an early visit by an Australian immigration team to East Timor to interview an initial group for reunion with other relatives in Australia. It was also agreed" according to a letter from the Acting Foreign Minister at the time, Mr Ian Sinclair, "that the remaining eligible nominees would be



TELEGRAMS 'IMMIGRATION' CANBERRA
TELEPHONE 73 0412

OUR REF.

YOUR REF.

Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs

CANBERRA, A.C.T. 2606

25 OCT 1978

Dear

I am pleased to be able to inform you that at talks held in Jakarta with the Indonesian authorities recently, the following persons you have nominated were included on the list of people in the categories agreed between the two governments:

The Indonesian Government has agreed to try to locate your nominees in Timor and, should they wish to migrate to Australia, to invite them to attend an interview with an Australian Immigration Officer and for a medical examination in Dili later this year.

Yours sincerely,

N.C.J. HOFFMANN
for Secretary

Without this letter, no family reunion. Even with it, the odds are very poor.

processed under normal immigration procedures as quickly as possible".

A three-man Immigration team, led by Mr Norman Hoffmann, arrived in Dili on Christmas Day 1978. There was no matching visit of an Indonesian immigration team to Australia at the same time, though an exchange of teams had previously been agreed to in principle. The visit would not have been warranted as no Timorese in Australia wished to return to an Indonesian-controlled Timor. Following the Hoffmann-team visit to Dili, 99 Timorese arrived in Australia in mid-January 1979 for tearful reunions with their families.

They were the first Timorese to have come from East Timor since the last half of 1975. They were also the last to come in this official, public manner, direct from Dili with their expenses wholly paid by the Australian government.

Since January 1979, a further 196 people on the agreed list have come to Australia for reunion with their families. That is, three years after the official lodging of nominations and five years after their separation, less than half of the agreed family reunions, i.e. 295 out of 625, have occurred. It is to be noted, however, that an estimated 100 other Timorese not on the agreed list have been admitted to Australia from Timor over these years either on the basis of special consideration or because they have met the occupational and other criteria governing normal admittance.

Discrimination and corruption

With few exceptions, all those who have come from Timor, whether on the agreed list or not, have been Chinese-Timorese, a fact the Australian Government acknowledges. Only one or two mixed or indigenous Timorese have been allowed to leave. And with few exceptions, all have had to pay substantial bribes to Indonesian officials or private citizens in both Dili and Jakarta to obtain the necessary exit permits. Money for these payments, which vary between \$A1500 and 3000 per head, has been sent from Australia by relatives or raised by the sale of property in Timor. For example, one woman who arrived in Australia in 1975 with two of her children, leaving behind her husband and six children, has already paid \$6000 (in bribes, air-fares Dili-Jakarta, and accommodation in Jakarta) to bring

PEMERINTAH PROPINSI DAERAH TINGKAT I TIMOR TIMUR

SURAT IZIN BEPERGIAN

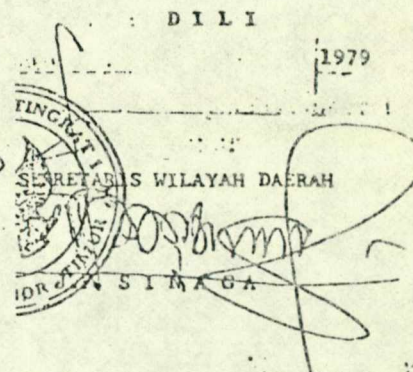
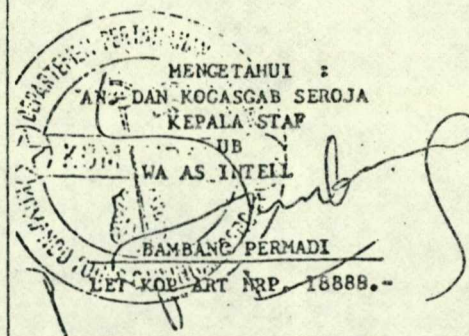
Nomor: /SIB/ 978

DIBERIKAN IZIN BEPERGIAN KEPADA :

1. N a m a :
2. Tempat dan tanggal lahir :
3. Jenis kelamin :
4. Nikah / belum : BELUM
5. P e k e r j a a n : TURUT ORANG TUA
6. Tempat tinggal : DILI / TIMOR TIMUR
7. Maksud bepergian : MENENGOK FAMILI
8. Tempat berangkat : DILI / TIMOR TIMUR
9. Tempat tujuan : JAKARTA
10. K e n d a r a a n : PESAWAT UDARA
11. Tanggal berangkat : KESEMPATAN PERTAMA
12. Tanggal kembali : SETELAH 14 HARI DITEMPAT
13. Biaya perjalanan : DITANGGUNG SENDIRI

C a t a t a n :

MEMBAWA PERLENGKAPAN KEPERLUAN SIHARI-HARI.



This exit permit cost \$500. Its signatories are the senior Indonesian Intelligence Officers in East Timor.

her husband and three of the children. She will need at least another \$5,000 to bring the other three children who are still in East Timor.

To obviate these twin injustices of discrimination and corruption, Timorese in Australia have repeatedly called on the Australian Government to send an Immigration team

back to Timor to process all eligible nominees on the spot and bring them direct to Australia. In response the Australian Government has been content to make cautious representations through diplomatic channels and appears to accept that nothing more can be done.

On the matter of bribery, for

example, Mr Macphee the current Minister for Immigration has said: *"I am aware of allegations which have been made in this regard and this matter has been raised with the Indonesian authorities. I understand that it has been investigated, but you will appreciate that effective action to eliminate this problem can only be taken by the Indonesian authorities"*. (Jan 3, 1980) *

A similar attitude of acquiescence is expressed by the Foreign Minister, Mr Peacock, in his reply to a request to send an immigration team to Dili: *"this possibility has been raised in discussion with the Indonesians but . . . there has been no substantive reaction — the question of entry to East Timor is, of course, one for the Indonesian authorities to decide"*. (March 20, 1980) This means, in effect, that the Australian Government accepts it can do nothing for those on the agreed list until they present themselves at the Australian Embassy in Jakarta.

The situation now

The Timorese in Australia now generally believe that the Indonesian authorities have decided to shut the door on any further departures from Timor — that is, not to honour their side of the 'in principle agreement' any longer. The Australian Government denies this. In reply to a question in the Senate on April 1, 1980 Senator Carrick said: *"The program is continuing, although slowly. Four Timorese on the agreed list have arrived in Australia in the last six weeks. Eight others are currently in Jakarta awaiting issue of Indonesian exit permits"*.

The implication in this reply that the figures supplied show the program has not ended is fallacious. It does not address the crucial question of whether people are at this point allowed to leave East Timor. Nor does it allow that the only way out of Jakarta for these people at the moment is by subterfuge. Timorese who have negotiated the first leg of the long journey from Dili to Jakarta and been issued there with visas to enter Australia by the Australian embassy are being denied exit permits by the Indonesian authorities — a fact which the Australian Government has elsewhere acknowledged. Those who arrived here recently have got around this only by forging Indonesian passports and travelling on them to Singapore (which does not require visas of

Indonesian citizens) whence they have made their way to Australia.

These people, in one sense, have been the lucky ones. For the majority of those affected — perhaps especially the 20 wives whose husbands are still in Timor — the future looks bleak indeed.

It may well be their only hope for reunion is the direct and strong intervention of an influential third party — for example the United Nations, or the International Red Cross, or a less pusillanimous Australian Government. What chance is there of this?

United Nations

The Timorese have called on the UN to intervene several times. The UN in fact passed a resolution on November 21, 1979 as follows:

"The General Assembly requests the United Nations Children's Fund and the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to render, within their respective fields of competence, all possible assistance to the people of East Timor, particularly the children and those seeking to leave for another country for purposes of family reunion . . ." (emphasis added) The writer is not aware of any activity to date on the part of these two bodies in response to this request.

International Red Cross

The agreement drawn up between the International Red Cross (ICRC) and the Indonesian Red

ICRC itself would not intervene. The reply added, however, that since Portugal had no diplomatic links with Indonesia ICRC would try to act as an intermediary with Indonesia for those applicants who might be accepted by Portugal. This has been done, and it would appear has some chance of success. Some light has been thrown on ICRC's puzzling reluctance to offer the same service to the family reunion program between Timor and Australia by the Secretary-General of Australian Red Cross, Mr Leon Stubbings. He reported on January 10, 1980 after discussions with ICRC during a visit to Timor that the ICRC is at present not involved in the family reunion program "as the issue is considered too political". Given the present state of the program and the fact that the ICRC operation in East Timor has been extended for another six months, it may well be time for the ICRC to revise its position and seek to broaden its program inside East Timor to include some more of its traditional works, including family reunions.

The Australian Government

As one would expect, the Australian Government defends its record on family reunions. It argues in its official statements and correspondence that it has done "everything possible in the most difficult circumstances" (Macphee) to reunite Timorese families. It points to its record of admitting 1800 refugees from Timor in mid-1975, paying for their initial settlement, and providing

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Cross on June 19, 1979 covering their current joint operation in East Timor refers only to a food and medical relief operation. No mention is made of the other traditional ICRC works, one of which is family reunions. ICRC's attention was drawn to the problem of family reunions in a document directed to them in September 1979 by Action for World Development. The Director of Operations in Geneva replied on October 5, 1979 that Australia should tackle this problem with Indonesia through diplomatic channels, implying that

welfare assistance. It claims that its efforts have been responsible for the admission of another 400 people from East Timor since then. The Timorese are sternly reminded by the Minister for Immigration that "Australia's ability to absorb new settlers is not unlimited" (a position the Northern Territory Administration with its new drive to populate the North clearly rejects). The Timorese are even chastised for their alleged "criticism (in the press) . . . of efforts being made by the Australian authorities to help them, their relatives and

countrymen" (Macphee). No account is taken of Australia's wartime debt to the Timorese, the horrors inflicted on them during recent times, and the special obligations Australia has to them as a neighbour.

Both Mr Peacock and Mr Macphee do concede, however, that "the program has not proceeded as quickly as we would have liked".

Indonesian obstructions

The principal responsibility for the slow pace of the program and its present stalemate rests with the Indonesian Government and, in particular, its military. They would like, of course, to repair their bad image by repatriating Timorese from Australia to Timor, but as there are no applicants this is not possible.

Australian Foreign Affairs officials give three reasons for Indonesia's reluctance to allow departures from Timor. One, they are concerned that the exodus of a big number of people would reflect badly on their administration; two, they fear that new arrivals from Timor will talk about their experiences since the Indonesian invasion adding to anti-Indonesian sentiment in Australia; and three, they do not wish to add to the growing expatriate community of Timorese in Australia who, they fear, may eventually engage in anti-Indonesian activity similar to the Moluccans in Holland.

Australian officials say they have continually tried to calm Indonesian apprehensions about Timorese 'story-telling' and hypothetical political activity by pointing out there is no evidence to support their fears and that in fact they have more to lose by reneging on their undertaking to reunite families for this will only generate greater antipathy. Privately, however, these officials are far from optimistic about the completion of the reunion program. They believe that some of those on the agreed list who have lived through the Indonesian invasion and been eye-witnesses to particular events or who have been members of UDT or Fretilin may never be reunited with their families in Australia.

It is plausible that the Indonesian method employed to date of allowing Timorese to leave only in ones and twos is intended to enable them to buy time until greater control has been established in Timor and outside visitors can be more freely admitted to offset refugee criticisms. How long this will be is not known;

but reports of continued fighting suggest it could be a long time. It is probable that the slow release of family members and intermittent cut-offs of the program are also being used to guarantee the co-operation of the people involved both inside and outside Timor. Certainly Timorese in Australia are reluctant to criticise Indonesia for fear of jeopardising the program or bringing harm to a relative inside Timor. Australian Government officials reinforce this attitude by repeatedly warning Timorese not to criticise or engage in public activity. In this sense the Timorese in Timor are hostages (or to use the

This is reflected on the practical plane by the attitudes of Immigration officials in Canberra who consider their role is a limited one; that they are merely the mechanics in the exercise and that real power lies with the Department of Foreign Affairs which has set the parameters and controls the negotiations according to the constraints of foreign policy. These dictate that Australia's trading, political and defence relations with Indonesia are the priority and that nothing must be done to erode this relationship. It follows then that Australia will remain low-key on family reunions and attempt to see

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Timorese term 'political prisoners') for their detention is being used to extract concessions out of and exercise control over other Timorese.

Indonesian reluctance to allow an Australian immigration team to return to Timor appears to stem from two factors. They fear that the prolonged presence of such a team would attract mass applications to leave. There have been many reports now that some 15,000-18,000 Timorese filled the streets of Dili last year asking to leave when it became known that ICRC was prepared to act on behalf of Portuguese nationals. The Indonesians wish to avoid such a demonstration of dissidence before officials of a Government whom they wish to convince about the normality of life in East Timor. Secondly, the Indonesians seem not to fully trust the Australian Government on Timor. For example, Mr Norman Hoffmann, the Canberra official who led the only immigration team so far to have visited Timor, reported that during his brief stay in December 1978 he had the feeling the Indonesians did not believe he was an Immigration official.

Good relations with Indonesia the priority

The Australian Government's reaction to Indonesian manoeuvres on family reunions is governed above all by foreign policy considerations.

that others, including the Timorese, do likewise. It will continue to work quietly behind the scenes for the reunion program because it is in its domestic political interest to do so. New procedures will be diplomatically suggested to the Indonesian bureaucracy for their consideration; Mr Peacock will discreetly raise the matter with Dr Mochtar from time to time; it will be mentioned during routine talks with the Indonesian ambassador in Canberra; even an extra-low profile attempt at back-door negotiations courtesy of a private citizen will be tried. But nothing remotely akin to Australia's public statements and activity on behalf of the US hostages in Teheran can be expected. For as a senior official in the Immigration Department, L.W.B. Engledow, has put it recently: "there is little more we can do without risking a deterioration in our relations with that country" (Indonesia).

There have been five years to test the effectiveness of this approach. In that time less than 50 per cent of those eligible have come from Timor. In addition the program now appears to have broken down. And Australian officials are privately admitting it may never be completed. That is a failure in anybody's book and no cause for self-congratulation on the part of the Australian Government. If the Australian Government is not prepared to concede this and do more who is left to safeguard the human rights and futures of the separated Timorese families? ○